FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
September 14, 2001

REFLECTION
COMMUNITY SERVICE OF PRAYER AND REMEMBRANCE
John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Habakkuk 1:2-4; 2:1-3
Lamentations 3:17-26
Psalm 139:1-12

It used to be the custom in England to ring the parish church bell when a member of the community died.

It was that lovely custom John Donne had in mind when he wrote

> No man is an island, entire of itself; Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. . . . Any man's death diminishes me. . . . Therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Every one of us is the less this morning. Every one of us knows that we live in a different country and a world, that something changed dramatically and profoundly Tuesday morning. Each one of us grieves the loss of so many innocent lives—but also the loss of what was torn from us. But we have learned something about the human family this week. We have been reminded that our nation, large, diverse, spread out across a huge continent, in great cities and small towns, in farm communities and sprawling suburbs—we have been reminded by the events of last Tuesday that our nation is a community. A precious and, at its heart, a resilient community. And we have been reminded through messages from abroad, from other nations, from friends and religious communities, by gestures of solidarity and sympathy—the American flag displayed in Moscow, our national anthem played by a royal military band at the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace—we have been reminded of that larger community, the human race, the family of God.

An act designed to humiliate and discourage through its cruel violence has, instead, inspired us to reach out to one another and to reach back, to reach inward, to our spirits.

Our president has proclaimed this a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance and asked the American people to gather in places of worship at noon today in memorial services. All across our nation it is happening. And this past week people gathered in mosques, synagogues, cathedrals, and churches to reflect on the enormity of what has happened and to pray. Stunned by disbelief, numbed by the violence, frightened by the random terror and incredible destruction, Americans reached out and are reaching out to one another and together in many faith traditions are lifting it all up—the events themselves and the swirling currents of emotion internally—to God.

Disbelief: this can't have happened to us. Followed by anger: someone must pay for this. Turning to retaliation, doubt, and even anger to God: Why did this happen? How could this happen? All of that is our shared experience.

And all of it, even our doubts and anger, can be brought into God's presence. Did you hear those words form ancient scripture read by Father McLaughlin:

> O Lord, how long shall I cry for help
> and you will not listen?
> Or cry to you, "Violence!"
> and you will not save?

Of course we feel assaulted and violated. Of course we have experienced anger. What we must not do is encourage the cycle of violence, and what we must not tolerate is mindless striking out at innocent people. We must not target an ethnic group, a faith community. The planners and perpetrators of last Tuesday's crimes are no more representative of Islam and our Muslim neighbors than the people who threw a bomb at little Catholic girls on their way to school in Belfast are representative of Protestant Christianity. It is important precisely to honor the victims and remember them in gratitude, to reach out and extend our concern and love to Muslim neighbors. We must not demonize Palestinians or the people of Afghanistan. Intolerance and violence as a response to what happened to us gives a great victory to those who committed the acts of violence.

There is a better way, by far, to honor and remember, and it comes from the heart of our shared faith tradition as Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

Its source is our conviction that every human being is a child of God; that our worth and dignity is not something we earn, but a gift given by our creator; that we are given the great gift of freedom to determine who and what we will be.

Victor Frankl, Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist, twentieth-century saint, said that there is a depth in our souls not accessible to the oppressor, a place deep inside each of us not accessible to evil. Frankl saw it as concentration camp prisoners refused to be reduced by their captors, reached out to one another, in the midst of unbelievable evil, in acts of kindness. And so we have witnessed it in countless acts of courage and selflessness in New York and Washington, D.C., as brave firefighters and police and rescue workers and thousands of ordinary citizens lined up to give blood and lighted candles and did what they had to do for the sake of another human being.

May that characterize our response to what has happened.

And may we not forget the promise of our shared faith: that there is one who loves each of us with a love that is eternal, a love stronger than any earthly power, a love stronger than death. A God who knows us and loves and shares our humanness, a God who rejoices with us and shares our grief, a God who wept last Tuesday morning along with us.

May we remember the promise that even in the valley of the shadow of death we need fear no evil, for God is with us.

And that even in the presence of our enemies, God prepares a table for us.

May we commend to God's eternal love all who have died and their families and loved ones.

The God, the psalmist wrote, who follows us

> If we take the wings of the morning and flee to the farthest limits of the sea.

A God whose hand leads and holds us and in whose presence, even in the deepest darkness, there is light.

Amen.

Please rise and join me in words written by Desmond Tutu of South Africa and may they be for today and for the days ahead our affirmation of faith.

> Goodness is stronger than evil;
> love is stronger than hate;
> light is stronger than darkness;
> life is stronger than death;
> victory is ours through God who loves us.